

Advisory Committee on Acoustic Impacts on Marine Mammals Chartered by the Marine Mammal Commission

Over the last two decades, marine mammal scientists have increasingly turned their attention to potential impacts of man-made sounds in oceans (e.g., shipping noise, Navy sonar, seismic exploration, etc.) that may affect marine mammals. Recent events, such as strandings of beaked whales in the Bahamas and Canary Islands coincident with military activities, U.S. Navy development and testing of low-frequency active sonar, and lawsuits challenging sonar testing and certain types of marine mammal acoustic research have increased attention on marine mammal protection from sound activities. In addition, the issues have been the subject of three reports in the last decade from the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences (NRC/NAS) that highlighted concerns but also identified lack of specific information about the effects of acute and chronic noise sources on marine mammals.

In 2003, partly in response to the increasing controversies about sound and marine mammals, Congress directed the Marine Mammal Commission to "fund an international conference or series of conferences to share findings, survey acoustic 'threats' to marine mammals, and develop means of reducing those threats while maintaining the oceans as a global highway of international commerce." The Commission responded to this charge by consulting with the U.S. Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution about the creation of a multi-stakeholder dialogue focused on addressing the impacts of man-made sound on marine mammals. Through the Institute, the Commission hired a team of neutral conflict resolution facilitators to help construct and manage such a dialogue process.

Between August and November of 2003, the facilitation team conducted over eighty interviews across a wide variety of interested and affected parties (e.g., those that introduce sound into the marine environment for research or economic purposes, regulatory agencies, those with national security interests, environmental groups, researchers, etc.) to assess the feasibility of productive collaboration and dialogue on this topic. The facilitators found that stakeholders across the various interests were positive about participating in a policy dialogue because they believed efforts to date had not adequately addressed issues of science, management and mitigation and it was desirable to discuss the issues in an open and collaborative forum. The facilitators prepared a report describing their assessment and summarizing key research and policy questions, challenges to the dialogue process, and procedural and representation recommendations.

In November, 2003, the Commission formally chartered the Federal Advisory Committee on Acoustic Impacts on Marine Mammals. The Committee will build on the NRC/NAS reports and other research to:

- review and evaluate information on the impacts of human-generated sound on marine mammals and their habitat,
- identify areas of general scientific agreement and uncertainty or disagreement,
- identify research needs and priorities and a strategy to conduct the needed research, and
- recommend management actions and strategies to avoid and mitigate possible adverse effects.

The Committee will submit its report to the Commission in the spring of 2005, at which time the Commission will prepare a report to Congress.

The Committee held its first meeting 3-5 February 2004 in Bethesda, Maryland. Additional plenary meetings are scheduled for 28-30 April 2004 in Crystal City, Virginia; 27-29 July 2004 in San Francisco, California; 30 November 30-2 December 2004 in New Orleans, Louisiana; and February 2005 in Washington, DC. The Commission recently sponsored a technical workshop on beaked whales, held 13-16 April 2004 in Baltimore, Maryland, and is planning a workshop on international policy, which will be held 28-30 September 2004 in London, England in partnership with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee. These workshops will support the overall policy dialogue process, helping to inform the Committee's deliberations. In addition, the Commission is working with the National Marine Fisheries Service's Office of Protected Resources and others to develop a public education and outreach program on the topic of anthropogenic sound and marine mammals, and is co-sponsoring a symposium entitled "Shipping Noise and Marine Mammals: A Forum for Science, Management, and Technology," which will be held 18-19 May 2004 in Arlington, Virginia.

For a copy of the *Process Assessment Report for a Dialogue on Impacts of Anthropogenic Noise on Marine Mammals*, a list of committee members, meeting summaries, and other information, please see the Marine Mammal Commission website at www.mmc.gov. Further information may also be obtained by contacting the Sound Project Manager, Erin Vos, at the Marine Mammal Commission.